

When Your Friend Is Depressed...Don't and Dos

What do you do when your friend is depressed? Help or Hinder?

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"Wow," I said aloud as I watched *Mello* make a thirty footer to tie the game. "The Knicks can do it," I told myself, "they can beat the Celtics. 10 minutes left, plenty of time," were my internal cheers.

Then, worse than the sound of a game ending buzzer, my blackberry made a noise.

Instinctually, I answered and, despite the fact the Knicks just threw the ball away, I was pleased to hear the voice of a good friend, although her voice inflection seemed down. Eight forty left on the game clock.

"Hey, what's up?" I soon understood her voice's message. To summarize, one of her best friends, a very successful professional woman, had, like millions of others, fallen victim to clinical depression. Over the course of a year, her life had fallen apart. Divorce, a loss job, avoiding friends-the story is familiar to most mental health professionals. I was now listening attentively and I could hear the sadness and frustration in my friend's words. She finished on the hope I could give her some advice on how to help her depressed friend,

I took a ten second mental time- out to remind myself that her dilemma is common. Statistics alone would tell you that there is a good chance you have faced, or will face the same challenge-help a friend when they are depressed. I also knew that despite good intentions, most people are ineffective in this daunting task.

In the next second, my course was clear. I broke the silence "listen, get a piece of paper. I am going to giving you some tips for helping your depressed friend. I want you to write them down so you will be more aware of them."

While she searched for a pen, I went to my nearby bookshelf and found what I was looking for: **Contagious Emotions: Staying well when your love one is depressed, by Ronald Podell, M.D.** Dr. Podell is a practicing psychiatrist in Los Angeles and the leading expert in helping individuals effectively cope with the depression of their loved ones. I knew his tips would help my friend. It was easy to find what I was looking for, as I had referenced the book many times.

"Ready?"

"Go ahead," she said.

First, I will tell you what **NOT to do**-you certainly don't want to inadvertently make it worse:

1. Don't try to be strong for your friend by telling him to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps and be tough." Watch what you say despite your good intentions because you will tend to say the wrong thing many times and be discouraging.
2. Don't get so involved and frustrated by your friend's seeming lack of optimism and confidence that you wind up arguing with your friend--especially about what he should and should not do.
3. Do not join your depressed friend in his depression--remember that depression is contagious and that your friend's feelings are not your feelings.

I told her to keep those tips near her phone so when she spoke to her friend, she'd have a reminder. Now write down **What To Do**:

1. Maintain warm, caring relationship free from hostility and tension
2. Learn to cope with the hardships that relating frequently with a depressed person can impose such as the tendency to be lured into destructive criticism and arguments about your friend's passivity.
3. Learn what depression is--a clinical disorder that is not something someone turns "on" or "off" and may be triggered by an event but becomes a brain chemistry disorder separate from that event.

I told her to keep these tips next to her phone too and that she should immediately go to Amazon and order a copy of **Contagious Emotions: Staying well when your loved one is depressed, by Ronald Podell**.

She thanked me for listening, for helping her feel better -- I was applying many of Dr. Podell's tips-and said she would order the book as soon as we hung up." "Take care," were my final words.

Then it hit me-I was now looking at a rerun of The A Team. I may have helped my friend, but I would have to settle for Knick-Celtic ESPN highlights. Not fair. In the next few seconds, I find out the Knicks lost at the buzzer-a great game, and I missed it. I try to help a friend, and I get screwed. So not fair," ran my thoughts. I started to feel depressed-but I knew what to do.

I reached for my blackberry, got information, "Operator, in Los Angeles, Dr. Ronald Podell, he is a psychiatrist...hurry up!"